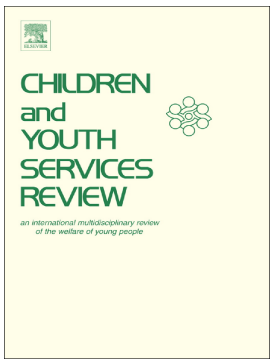

Children's views on school-age care: Child's play or childcare?

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Children's views on school-age care: *child's play or childcare?*

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Abstract

School aged care (SAC)[1] is a much neglected policy and research area, with particularly limited literature on children's views and experiences of school aged care. This article examines the findings from government consultations with 177 five to twelve-year-old Irish children on their likes, dislikes and opinions on the afterschool care experience using a variety of creative and age-appropriate methodologies. The findings from the consultations indicate that children want to be able to relax and feel comfortable after school. Play was identified as the most popular after-school activity by children of all ages; relationships with family, extended family, friends, childminders and other carers were noted as being very important; and eating and cooking were also identified as central activities for children in the after-school period of their day. Children expressed a dislike of being in structured environments with rules, not being treated appropriately for their age and lack of food choice. The results are reflective of international research in this area which highlights the value placed by children on opportunities to engage in activities, free play and to develop and extend friendships in afterschool care contexts. Policy development must address these priorities, in the context of the reality of the different sites of care for children and personnel available to carry out school age care.

Keywords: School age care; children; voice; policy.

[1] SAC is an abbreviation for school age care

1. Introduction

School age care (SAC), also referred to as after school care and school aged childcare, is defined as 'childcare which encompasses a wide range of non-scholastic, safe, structured programme offerings for school-going children aged 4–12 years, whether provided by childminders or in formal settings. The service operates outside of normal school hours, i.e. before school, after school and during school holidays, excluding the weekends. The same children attend the service on a regular basis and access to the service is clearly defined by agreement with parents and guardians. The main purpose of the service is to promote children's holistic development and to care for children where their parents are unavailable' (DCYA, 2017, p. 11). SAC settings are important contexts of childhood and development and are one of the fastest growing ECEC services provided for children and families (Cartmel & Grieshaber, 2014). Yet, research within the field of school age care, policy and practice is scattered and scarce (Hjalmarsson, 2011; Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015; Dockett & Perry, 2016; Cartmel & Hayes, 2016). Furthermore, Cartmel & Grieshaber (2014, p. 23) caution that there remains 'a lack of understanding and appreciation of the role played by SAC in the lives of contemporary families'. While research on parents' perceptions and experiences of after-school care is limited, even less is available with regard to children's experiences (Karlsson, Perala-Littunen, Book, & Lofdahl Hultman, 2016). What literature there is provides some picture of what children value in after-school provision. They appear to prioritise play, having some freedom, choice in activities, being with their friends and making new friends, having private spaces and the availability of supportive and at times non-intrusive adults (Smith & Barker, 2001; Strandell, 2013; King & Howard, 2014; Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015). This article considers the growth of school age care as a phenomenon and provides a brief overview of the literature on children's views on such care. The authors examine Irish policy in this area, and, against this backdrop, present the findings from government consultations undertaken with children aged 5 to 12 years to inform the recently published *Action Plan on School Age Childcare* (2017).

1.1 School age care policy context in Ireland and elsewhere

In general, school age care (SAC) is seen as the Cinderella of child care services when compared with provision for early childhood education and care services (Cartmel & Grieshaber, 2014; Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015). Following a legacy of under-investment, childcare in Ireland is characterised by a strong reliance by parents on extended family and members of the local community. Policy developments have focused on capital grants for pre-school providers, community subventions for low income families and the

universal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme through which children aged 3 to 5 can avail of two years of free pre-school. Yet, parental concerns about the gap between school hours and parents work hours is well documented internationally (Barnett, Gareis, Sabattini, & Carter, 2010; Gallagher 2013; Saraceno, 2011).

Moloney (2009) notes that, in common with similar patterns throughout Europe and the United States, growth in school-age childcare programmes continues to increase in Ireland (albeit slowly) in response to parental demands for safe, supervised environments for children during their out of school time. There has been a fall in the number of children using parental childcare in Ireland between 2007 and 2016 and the decrease is larger among primary school children (from 81% to 74%) indicating a growing need for and use of afterschool care options. However, the most commonly used type of non-parental childcare for primary school children nationally is a paid or unpaid relative or family friend (19%), while only 8% use a Créche, Montessori, Playgroup or Afterschool facility (CSO, 2017). So, while in recent years many formal or centre-based services have been developed, relatives and friends remain the most popular form of non-parental after-school childcare in Ireland (CSO, 2017). The limited research conducted in this area in Ireland reflects the low numbers of children in formal SAC. For example Byrne & O'Toole (2015), using the national longitudinal study of children figures from 2002 to 2008, estimate that just 3% of 9 year olds are participating in centred based SAC using a broad definition of centre-based care to include homework and after-school clubs and activity camps. SAC services in Ireland can take the form of Homework clubs operated by primary schools for a fee or by the State or community childcare services; Afterschool clubs run by community-based or private services; Breakfast clubs located in schools and supported by the State; After-school clubs in school premises offered by a mix of private providers; After-school as part of a crèche offering; stand alone after-school offered by private providers; as well as childminders; and au-pairs (DCYA, 2017). The European Commission, in the first Europe-wide study of the provision of SAC (Plantenga and Remery, 2013), concludes that across Europe the provision of school-age childcare is "rather limited". However, provision in Ireland is even more limited than elsewhere with SAC seen as a 'parental responsibility' largely left to parents. Ireland comes bottom, with Spain, of a European table of SAC quality standards using child to staff ratios, maximum group size and qualifications of staff. This poor quality rating results from the lack of qualification requirements for staff working in school-age childcare in Ireland, as well as the absence of regulation that would limit child-to-staff ratios and group sizes (Plantenga & Remery; 2017).

Against a background of limited choice and an extremely poor level of public support for school age care services (Barry, 2011, p12), recently there has been an increasing demand for improved access to high quality and affordable SAC and a focus on developing policy in this area. An Inter-Departmental Group on Future Investment in Early Years and School-age Care and Education, led by the DCYA, was established in 2015 and tasked with identifying and assessing policies and future options for increasing the quality, supply and affordability of early years and school age care and education services in Ireland (DCYA, 2015a). A consultation process was undertaken with a range of key stakeholders and representatives from the early years and school-aged care and education sector and online consultations were also held with the general public and parents. As part of this process, the DCYA consulted with children on their experiences and preferences regarding SAC. The authors attended and reported on the children's consultations. All of this activity culminated in the publication in 2017 of an *Action Plan on School Age Childcare* (DCYA, 2017) to develop the infrastructure for accessible, high quality, affordable school age childcare for all children in Ireland. Furthermore, government supports for school age childcare were extended in 2017 under the affordable childcare scheme which offers up to €7500 annually for families on lower incomes with children under 15 years of age. However, parents still rely on non-centralised SAC services run by a mixture of private and voluntary organisations.

In contrast to the *ad* hoc SAC provision in Ireland, a model of provision designed to facilitate working parents and offering care before and after school hours and during school holidays has operated for decades in other jurisdictions. In countries where SAC is more established, for example Sweden and Finland, settings range from public primary schools, to sport clubs arranged by voluntary sport organisations, to play parks, although more recently a shift towards integrating it into school systems has been identified by Strandell (2013). Likewise, in Australia the majority of SAC services are located on school grounds (Cartmel & Hayes, 2016). In New Zealand, SAC programmes known as OSCAR (Out of School Care and Recreation) are located in or near schools (Walter, 2007). In the US, SAC is referred to as 'after school programmes' – care has been replaced by programme which immediately conjures another representation of children's time after school. In many cases the focus of these programmes is to supplement the education of low-achieving students (Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow, & Martin-Glenn, 2006), thus making more close associations with education in SAC provision. Smith & Barker (2000) regard the expansion of the network of after-school centres as the most significant contemporary reform influencing children's lives outside the formal school system in Britain. However, similar to the Irish context, after-school reform there and elsewhere has created no centralised after-school system or new institutional structures. Typically,

after-school activities have been absorbed into already existing local institutions with, in many cases, schools developing after school initiatives and modelling activities in accordance with their own goals and interests (Strandell, 2013; Cartmel & Grieshaber, 2014; Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015). Policy seems to have been informed by neo-liberal debates on children's after-school time with an increasing focus on the instructional, developmental and social capital contributions of SAC and by rights-based debates on children's right to meaningful leisure time and care (Mahoney Parente, & Zigler, 2010; Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015).

2. Literature on school age care

Research on SAC programmes emphasised the benefits of SAC programmes targeted at low income children along with risks associated with children being at home without the supervision of adults (Strandell, 2013). The first generation of research in school age care was concerned with 'latchkey kids' with studies reporting some deficits in later academic and behavioural adjustment, such as lower cognitive functioning in girls from lower socio-economic groups. These early studies tended to focus on ethnic minority and low income communities (Marshall Garcia Coll, Marx, McCartney, Keefe, & Ruh, 1997). Later research demonstrated similar academic achievement and performance, ratings of emotional wellbeing, interpersonal interactions, and study skills for those in self- care (Vandell & Corasaniti, 1988); positive associations between self-care and antisocial behaviour (Posner & Vandell, 1994); and highlighted the independence and autonomy of children in self-care (Forsberg & Strandell, 2007). Increasingly, research points to the marginal position SAC activities have in educational policies (Dockett and Perry, 2016) and the negative implications for children of SAC driven by economic pressures. Other key themes in the literature relate to the value of SAC programmes in terms of the cognitive, social and other benefits experienced by participating children (Durlak, Weissberg & Roger, 2007; Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015), as well as children's own views on SAC (King and Howard, 2014; Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015; Dockett and Perry, 2016) which will be explored below.

2.1 Value of school age care programmes for children

The benefits of participation in school age care and after-school clubs have been highlighted in a range of studies and include opportunities to socialise with friends, relax, play, develop new skills and interests, participate in physical activity, , do homework, learn about themselves and their

worlds, and improve academic achievement. These include studies that prioritise educational benefits, and often maintain the language of education, referring to children as pupils, as well as studies that highlight broader social, personal and environmental benefits (Durlak, Weissberg & Roger 2007). There is much literature and research internationally on the value of targeted after-school programmes as a form of early intervention in lower-socio-economic communities (Posner & Vandell, 1994; Miller, 2003; Hennessy & Donnelly, 2005; Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow, & Martin-Glenn, 2006; Mahoney, Parente & Zigler, 2010; Strandell, 2012; Barnardos, 2014; Byrne, 2016). These studies show that pupils who regularly participate in high quality learning opportunities beyond the traditional school day can show improvement in behaviour, attitude, peer relations and achievement. Other research (Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015; Dockett and Perry, 2016) has highlighted that SAC environments are important contexts of childhood, constituting the main locations outside of school where children play and socialise together and provide opportunities for children's holistic development in terms of social skills, independence, opportunities for relaxation and taking risks (Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015). Specific gains in physical activity levels have been found, for example in a US study of 5 to 13 year olds participating in physical activity-enhanced after-school programmes in a community centre (Gesell & Sommer, 2013). Moloney (2009) in a review of research in Ireland indicates that quality school-age programmes provide safe, challenging and fun environments for children during non-school hours.

2.2 Children's views on School Age Care in the literature

While the international literature on children's views and experiences of SAC is limited, what does exist sheds light on how children spend their time after school, and how they experience different formal and informal SAC settings. Generally, the literature provides a picture of what children value in after-school provision. They appear to prioritise play, having some freedom, choice in activities, being with friends, having private spaces and the availability of supportive and, at times, non-intrusive adults (Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015; Strandell, 2012).

2.2.1 SAC: Spaces and places for SAC

The spaces and places for SAC are varied and the literature provides some insight into children's preferences. Studies focusing on children at home alone or with siblings after school generally highlight children's freedom to play outside or visit their friends' or neighbours' homes, as more circumscribed (Berman, Winkleby, Chesterman, & Boyce, , 1992) or focus on the loneliness and

dissatisfaction that children in self-care experience (Demircan & Demir, 2014). However, Ruiz-Casares, Rousseau, Currie, & Heymann (2012) in a Canadian study of 364 children point to the positive outcomes for children spending time at home alone in terms of developing confidence and responsibility, for those children who are able and ready. While, Forsberg and Strandell (2007) discuss Finnish children's positive spatial and social experiences of SAC around their homes, largely without adult presence. For most of these children, home was an ideal place for spending their after-school time, regardless of whether they were on their own, with peers, siblings, parents, or occasionally grandparents or others. They associated being at home with having more control of their space and time.

Research on children's views of school age care, however, generally emphasises the critical importance of space in terms of its facilitation of play, activities and friends. In an Australian study, Simoncini, Cartmel & Young (2015), found that children did not consider SAC a filler activity between school and home or somewhere they were "cared for", rather their responses show SAC as a context for development where they were building skills and competencies. It also highlights the importance children place on spatial aspects of SAC environments, preferring space and less rigid rules. Strandell (2013) analyses children's experiences of after-school care in schools, sports clubs run by voluntary organisations, and play parks in Finland. Findings reveal that children involved in SAC in schools complained about crowded spaces, strict order and many restrictions. In contrast, children in SAC integrated into play parks were encouraged to choose their own activities and make use of the facilities offered. While children in SAC in sports clubs were largely uncritical towards the coaching style of guidance and regarded the sporty and healthy lifestyle promoted by the club as superior to other SAC centres or to staying at home. However, the sports club in the study was located in the sport organisation's facilities and children who were less interested in sports had difficulties in finding something to do. This alerts us to the spatial challenges brought about where single-use buildings are used for multi-purpose activities and to the importance of adult's perspectives on activities, protection and managing risk in SAC settings.

2.2.2 Centrality of play to children's experiences in SAC

A key expectation of school age care experiences for children is play (PLÉ, 2016; Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015). This is underpinned by Article 31 of the UNCRC which sets out the child's right to play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities. Children's

choice within play is important (Henshall & Lacey, 2007; Kapasi & Gleave, 2009) and the paucity of opportunity children have to spend in authentic free play is highlighted in relation in a range of contexts; including out-of-school clubs, the playground and the home (Smith & Barker, 2001). The considerable decrease in time children spend playing over recent decades is well documented and has been connected with screen entertainment; competing extra-curricular activities; parental fears about children's safety; parents' lack of awareness about the benefits of unstructured activity and play and the shortage of quality play spaces near children's homes (Witherspoon & Manning, 2012).

Interestingly, however, King & Howard (2014) found that the out-of-school club offered a higher level of choice in play than either home or school playground environments. Their study involved children aged 6 to 11 years in Wales self-reporting on play in three contexts: home, school playground and out-of-school club. They looked at the types of play children engaged in and its social aspects. Children described the widest range of activities at the out-of-school club and were more likely to play with a friend there than at home. Overall findings indicated that children's choice in their play was clearly influenced by the activity that was chosen, the space that was available and the supervising adults' perception of play. The authors also looked at aspects of professional practice in out-of-school clubs which may differ from the school playground, where choice of play was perceived by children as much more limited. They suggest a key differentiating factor was that the club setting was staffed by play workers, trained to be sensitive in supporting children's play process and in facilitating choice in play. Simoncini, Cartmel & Young (2015), in their research with 164 children across 14 after-school services in Australia, also contend that SAC protects and promotes children's play by affording children time, space and resources to play. Their finding resonates with results from an English study by Barker, Smith, Morrow, Weller, Hey, & Harwin (2003) that SAC provides dedicated and uninterrupted play spaces for children with time and resources for play often more plentiful than those available at home or school.

2.2.3 SAC as a place of friends and friendships

SAC enables contexts for friendships to develop constituting the main locations outside of school where children play and socialise together (Bell, 2013 cited in Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015). Friendships give children the opportunity to practise and enhance their social, emotional, communication and language skills through their engagement in conversations, cooperative and pretend play, conflict, and the sharing of feelings and experiences (Dunn, Cutting & Fisher, 2002).

SAC also, importantly, allows children to socialise with children outside of school and of all different ages, something that may not occur in schools where children in different year levels are assigned different play areas.

The theoretical basis from which our own research stems is a child right's perspective grounded in Article 12 of the UNCRC (commonly referred to as the Participation Article). This recognises children as competent social agents and relational beings (Authors, 2017a) with a right to participate in decision-making. The key questions addressed in the consultations are what children like and dislike about school age care and the SAC settings where children most like to be cared for. The results will contribute to the existing limited literature by informing us of children's views and experiences of SAC in Ireland.

3. Methods

In light of the commitment in the Irish National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (DCYAb, 2015) to consult with children and young people on policies and issues that affect their lives, in 2016, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) engaged in consultations with children on school age care. Research methods adopted for this consultation with 5 to 12 year olds on their experiences of SAC were creative, participatory and age-appropriate. The authors were commissioned to attend, record and report on the consultations.

3.1 Participants

Consultation processes were held with 177 children in total comprising 81 children aged 5-7 years and 96 children aged 8-12 years from primary schools across Ireland. Consultations took place in May and June 2016. The consultations with 5–7 year-olds were conducted in their schools to enable smaller group work in a more familiar environment and were shorter in duration. A team of DCYA facilitators and the UCC research team travelled to four schools. All consultations with this age group concluded before 1.00pm to facilitate the children's earlier finishing time. Two large consultations with 8–12 year-olds were conducted in city centre venues with children from a number of schools attending. These were held mid-morning to facilitate those travelling and ended at 2.30pm to coincide with the length of their school day and also in acknowledgment of the fact that lengthy consultations are not suitable for children (Hennessy & Heary, 2005). Breakfast and lunch was

provided. A further group of 8–12 year-old children attended a consultation in a rural primary school.

Table 1: Consultations with children

Location of Consultation	**5 – 7 year olds**	**8-12 year olds**	**Total No. of children**
Location 1	22	44	66
Location 2	-	40	40
Location 3	21	-	21
Location 4	25	-	25
Location 5	13	12	-
Total	81	96	177

Children were recruited by the DCYA through the Irish Primary Principal's Network (IPPN). Individual School principals were contacted to participate and recruit children in their primary schools. Efforts were made to include a range of primary school types including Catholic schools, Educate Together, Gaelscoil, Co-educational, single sex, DEIS[2], urban and rural schools.

3.2 Consultation tools

The Department of Children and youth Affairs (DCYA) Participation Support Team carried out the consultations. The methods employed are regularly used in consultations conducted with children by the DCYA (Authors, 2015; Authors, 2016) and centred on group and individual activities (Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellett, & Robinson, 2007) with an emphasis on fun (Barker and Weller, 2003). Methods were strengths-based consultative approaches that allow children to identify and explore issues based on what they know and experience in their everyday lives and on what they would like to change or improve on those issues. They comprised of Ice-breaker games, Post-it Activity, Placemats,

[2] **DEIS** (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is a national targeted programme funded by the Irish Government which addresses the educational needs of children from disadvantaged communities.

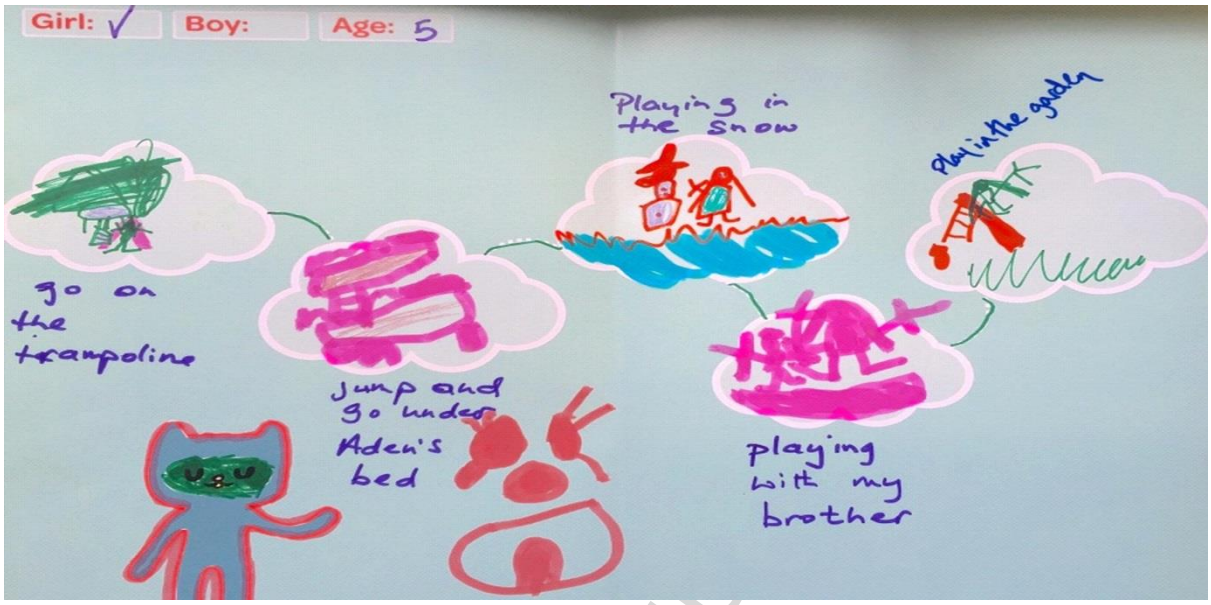
Timelines, and Voting. At the beginning of the consultations the facilitator introduced the adults in the room to the children and did some 'ice-breaker games' including a ball game, 'Whispering to Shouting' - a voice game, and 'Ship to Shore' - a listening game. Children were formed into groups largely based on age (for example all 5 year olds at one table). This was followed by a 'Post-it' exercise where children were asked to write on a 'Post-it' the places they go after school. When the children finished writing, the facilitators asked for a volunteer from each table to stick the notes to the wall and organise them into categories. The volunteers with some help from the facilitators identified patterns and themes and sorted the 'Post-its' into different categories: Home, Relatives, After-school, Crèche, Childminder and Friends house were the categories which emerged.

The children were next asked to choose a setting that they would most like to talk about. The children went to the relevant table dedicated to that setting e.g. after-school club/crèche, where one facilitator (or in the case of 5–7 year-old children two facilitators) began to work with them on the 'placemat exercise'. The children were asked to draw/write what they do after school in this SAC setting on large five foot square placemats. The facilitators asked the children to think about what they like and don't like about this SAC space and to write it down on the appropriate side of the placemat. Most children began by writing and then later added drawings to the placemat. The same patterns were evident in both age groups, in that children mostly drew what they generally do or what they were doing that week and that children influenced each other in their responses. Once this was completed, there was a group discussion and sticky dot voting by each child on three things they 'do not like' and three things they 'do like' about that specific SAC setting. Drawing was an important tool in these consultations with both age groups but especially with the 5 to 7 year old children. It is recognised as a valuable method in research with children enabling a participatory research approach with them and democratically involving them as 'producers of knowledge' (Elden, 2012; Author, 2016). Its value relates to the fact that it is common in children's lives and that it is often, although not always, successful in mediating conversations with participants (Wall, Hall, & Woolner, 2012).

Figure 1: SAC Placemat

The next exercise was the completion of a timeline - a rectangular mat with a number of clouds depicted against a blue background. The clouds identified stages of the day from the time school finishes until 6pm in the evening. Children were asked to design their ideal after-school experience: '[Draw/write] all the things you like to do after school. In the first cloud put what you like to do first.' The lifeline method has been used in research with children aimed at gathering information on the child's life history, in particular important transitions and events in the child's life. It enables the incorporation of some of the advantages of a qualitative longitudinal study in a research setting where it is not possible to follow children's lives for a longer period of time (Pirskanen, Jokinen, Kallinen, Harju-Veijola, & Rautakorpi, 2015). Most children choose to include pictures and text.

Figure 2: SAC Timeline (5 year old)



On completion of the timeline, the 5–7 year-olds were asked 'is there anything about your day after school that you don't like?' They were then given coloured cards to draw/write what they don't like and instructed to pop these into a ballot box on the table.

The older children (8-12 year olds) were asked to 'vote' on 'where would you like to be cared for?' from a list identified by themselves. The SAC settings chosen earlier were displayed on a screen at the voting station. The children were each given a card and asked to vote at a ballot box for the place they would 'most like to be cared for' after school. They were informed that the vote was private and anonymous and therefore they did not have to vote for the same SAC setting as their peers.

3.3 Data analysis

Recording and analysis of the data involved transcribing text from the placemats and noting all drawings along with any text related to drawings as written by the children themselves or the adult facilitators. The difficulty in analysing imaginative data is well recognised in research (Bland, 2012)

and so accompanying data comprising notes of what children were saying and facilitators' explanatory notes was critical for the analysis stage. All data was then coded thematically by the team who were mindful of focusing on presenting children's views in their raw form as much as possible.

3.4 Ethical considerations

The project methodology was guided by the national Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects Involving Children (DCYA, 2012) including parental consent and child assent and withdrawal procedures. An Information Sheet outlined the aims of the study and the uses to which the data would be put in child/young person friendly language.

A strict policy of confidentiality and anonymity was adhered to throughout the consultation process. Because much of the consultation involved group-based data gathering, all those participating undertook to preserve the confidentiality of others. Data collected from participants is identified in the Findings by age cohort (eg. 5–7 year-olds and 8–12 year-olds) only to preserve anonymity. A strategy was in place for addressing any sensitive issues arising for children and young people during the consultations. Facilitators were briefed regarding child protection issues or concerns prior to each consultation process and a debriefing afterwards to address any issues which may have emerged. If participants experienced any difficulties or problems, there were a number of contact points for help through the DCYA. All of the DCYA facilitators and the research team were Garda (police) vetted and were skilled and experienced in participatory work with children (DCYA, 2015; DCYA, 2016).

4. Consultation Findings

During the consultations children were invited to express their preferences on what they like to do after-school, where they like to spend their time, who they like to spend it with, and their preferences on school age care in general. The findings from the consultations indicate that children primarily want to be able to relax and feel comfortable after school. Outdoor and indoor play was identified as the most popular after-school activity by children of all ages. Relationships with family,

extended family, friends, childminders and other carers were noted as being very important to children. Eating and cooking were also identified as important activities for children in the after-school period of their day. Children expressed a dislike of being in structured environments with rules, and a very predictable and rigid order of activities. Other dislikes include not being treated appropriately for their age and a lack of food choice. The results are organised according to the voting results and the top themes that emerged from the timeline exercises, concluding with a section on children's views of structured SAC.

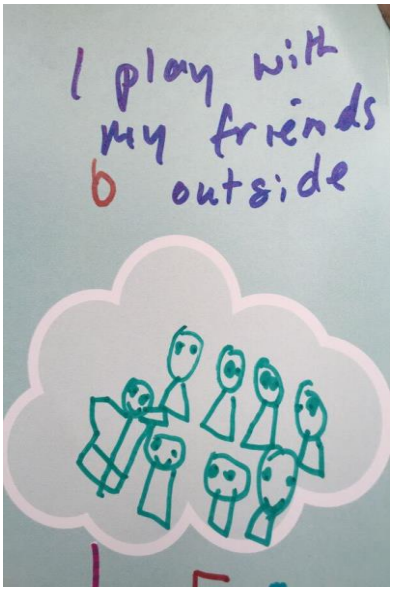
4.1 Spaces and Places: Children's versus parent's choices in SAC

The 8 to 12-year-olds voted on their preferred spaces for SAC from a list of settings identified by themselves. Overwhelmingly, children voted for home as the place they would most like to be cared for (59%) followed by friends' houses (17%), relatives (13%), after-school club (6%), childminder (4%) and crèche (1%).

4.2 Centrality of play to children's SAC experiences

For both cohorts of children, play emerged as the priority in children's SAC experiences. Using a definition of play as 'freely chosen, personally directed intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child' (NCO, 2004, p.6), play is central in children's SAC, representing 39% (212) of activity after-school recorded by 5-7 year olds and 28% (164) by 8-12 year olds. Outdoor play was extremely important to both age cohorts in these consultations, but especially so for the younger age group (Figure 2). Many of the references to outside play in this age cohort were associated with active play: football, riding bikes or flickers, and bouncing on trampolines. They were also often relational, 'playing with friends, having fun', 'play football or tennis with my Dad or sometimes my brother' and, 'play princess game with Dad'. Furthermore, most of the references to unstructured play were in relation to being outside 'Wing (game in the garden using our imagination)' and, in general, children simply identified outside as a place to go to play 'Go outside to play'. Other aspects of play emerging from the consultations with this younger age group involved toys, imaginary play and tech play. Indoor play was more likely to be focused on toys or technology, 'playing Lego' or 'I play water guns'. Tech play was mentioned on a number of occasions: 'PlayStation 4'; 'iPad (play games/watch things/Minecraft/YouTube)'. Boys were far more likely to mention technology than girls. Of the 21 references to play involving technology by the younger age cohort, girls made only five. Imaginary play 'play princess game' and music 'play drums' were also important.

Figure 2: 5-7 year olds drawings indicating outside play

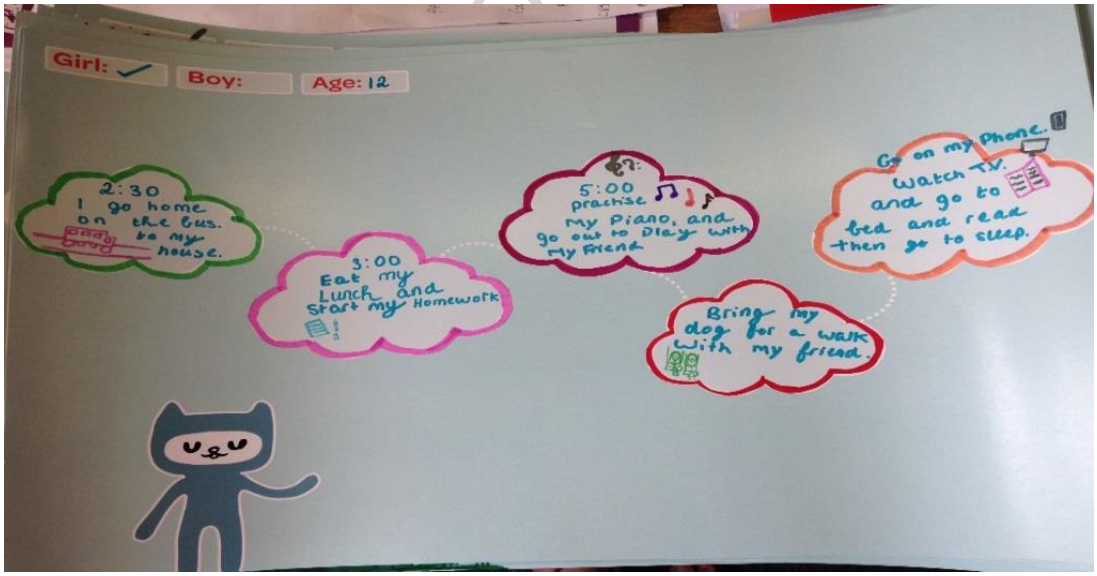


For the older children (8-12 years) in these consultations, three key aspects of play emerged as important which can be broadly categorised into relational play, tech play and outdoor play (Figures 3 and 4). Relational play was frequently cited including play with friends, siblings and parents, 'Play with friends', 'play football in my garden with my Dad and, 'play on my PS4 with my brother', 'play with brothers'. Indoor play very often involved technology such as Xbox, DVD, playing on a phone or tablet, 'play on my tablet … I play Clash of the Clans, Clash Royale and Minecraft with my friends', 'Watch a movie … in between play on iPad and other things', 'play on my iPod for three straight hours'. However, board games and art also featured: 'doing art at my 'hows (sic)'' or 'play a board game with my family'.

Figure 3: 7-12 year olds drawing indicating 'tech' play

Children emphasised the importance to them of a wide variety of play and of having choice within their everyday play. Those in structured SAC settings were often critical of the activities and equipment available to them in some of those settings including broken toys or not being allowed to go outside to play. Involvement in structured activities such as football, hurling, gymnastics, art classes, karate, was, not surprisingly, more of a feature of the SAC experience for the older cohort of children aged 8 to 12 years.

Figure 4: 7-12 year olds Timeline

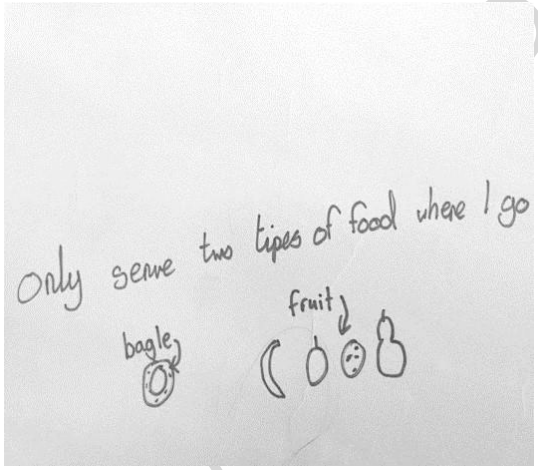


4.3 Food practices

Eating and food was the next most frequently mentioned theme in the children's Timelines. It represented 14% (77) of activity recorded by 5-7 year olds and 12.5% (74) by 8-12 year olds

appearing right throughout the afternoon in the 'Timelines' activity Food appeared in the context of having a snack straight after school - 'I like eating first' or after completing homework - 'have a sandwich', 'have a snack and get changed'. There were lots of references to having dinner in the evening with their families, '… then later on I would go in and have my dinner', 'watch TV with family and tea', 'have my dinner … eat dessert after dinner'. Going out to eat was also mentioned: 'go to McDonald's'. They enjoyed eating snacks and treats after school when they were hungry, 'Go to the café for hot chocolate' and, 'eat lots of treats … chocolate and jellies'. They had clear preferences in terms of whose cooking they liked – often mentioning a mother's dinner, granny's baking or a childminder's cooking - 'Cooking pancakes with my mum', 'Nan makes pizza for my dinner', '[Granny] cooks/bakes with me', and in a few cases referred to food they enjoyed in their afterschool club - 'They do nice dinners; chicken korma on Wednesdays'. However, children frequently mentioned disliking food in formal SAC settings (Figure 5) and specifically did not like not having a choice in what they ate, lack of food variety, and having to eat food in a predetermined order. 'I don't like they choose your food', ''I don't like dinner in my crèche', 'They give me the same food everyday – toast and apple'.

Figure 5: 5-7 year olds drawing on food in structured SAC

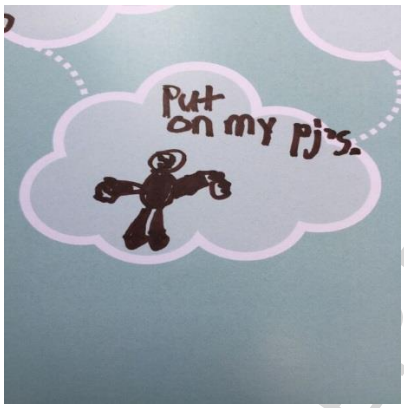


4.4 Home, Families and relaxation

Both cohorts of children discussed spending a lot of time at home and with immediate and extended family members who featured as both playmates and carers (77 or 14% of 5 to 7-year-olds and 87 or 15% of 8 to 12-year-olds). There were a number of descriptions of the journey home after school. In some cases, children provided some detail as to who they like to go home with emphasising the

relational aspect of the journey - 'I'll walk home with (names of friends)', 'go home with my Mam' and, 'go home with my Mammy and daddy'. Home was a place the children like to go to, 'I like going home after school', and the place in which children did things that they liked - 'feed fish at home' and, 'then I'd come home and play hurling'. The children in these consultations mentioned wanting to relax after school as then they were often tired (51 counts in the younger cohort and 35 counts in the older cohort). They referred to home in terms of their ability to relax there after school - 'put on my favourite clothes', 'get out of my uniform' and have access to their own things, having a snack, 'chilling out' 'watch TV', 'lying down', reading a book or postponing homework until later (Figure 6). Older children liked being at home or a home-like environment including their relative's homes to relax and feel comfortable. Some children mentioned their bedrooms as places they relaxed and played with their toys. The older children also spoke about the being able to 'chill out' and not feel hurried. Home was often discussed in the context of choice: 'I would like to go home because I miss home sometimes … 'I like to go home because u can do what u want and u can play with your friends'.

Figure 6: 5-7 year olds drawing on relaxation in SAC at home



4.5 Peer relationships

The children wanted opportunities to socialise with their friends whether they were at home, in a relative's or childminder's house or at a formal SAC setting (29 or 5% of 5 to 7 year-olds and 63 or 11% of 8 to 12 year-olds), 'I like going home because all my friends live in my estate', 'I love walking home with friends', 'at my friend's house we play on the trampoline … then home', 'We get to see our friends [at crèche afterschool]'. While references to friends predominated in the older age group of 8–12 year-olds, it was referred to significantly less often in the younger age group of 5–7 (29). Children wrote about and drew activities with friends mostly in the context of play: 'play with my friends', 'my new tree house with my friends', 'bring my dog for a walk with my friend', 'at my

friend's house we play on the trampoline … then home', 'I go out to play with my friend Emma', 'playing Bulldog with my friends', 'I play with my friends outside' and, 'play with my friend (name)'. But doing homework together with friends also emerged strongly - 'me and my friend do our homework'. Lots of children wrote about spending afternoons at their friends' houses - 'we do our homework then we play in her back garden and then at five we have tea and then we watch TV at six with her Mum'. Finally, just spending time with friends emerged - 'call for my friends', 'hang with my friends and, 'go see do (name) and (name) want to come up' (accompanied by a drawing of three figures).

4.6 Structured SAC settings

The children in structured SAC settings mentioned a larger number of issues which they disliked compared to the children participating in the other SAC contexts. The most frequently mentioned issue that children in structured SAC settings disliked was the food in the settings and in particular the lack of choice about what they ate and the rules which surrounded food consumption in the setting - 'I don't like dinner in my crèche' and, 'If we want a drink we have to wait'. The second most frequently mentioned issue which they disliked was the rules and structure within the settings. The children felt that they were not treated appropriately for their age and the children in the crèche settings did not like being in a setting they viewed as more suitable for smaller children. The 8-12-year- old children especially did not like being in settings they felt they had outgrown and were also critical of the activities and equipment available to them including broken toys or not being allowed to go outside to play. Examples they gave included seats that were too small for them, inappropriate toys and equipment, being with children who were younger than them and being unable to play with their peers. 'I don't like it when I have to play with baby toys', 'Broken toys', 'The fence is way too small for playing football', 'The place is too small for a lot of children', 'I don't like when the toddlers annoy me', 'Young kids/The kids are way too loud', and 'I don't like people annoying me in my crèche (little children shout so loudly)'. They were critical of the number of rules they had to follow and they perceived that some of the settings were very strict. The relationships within these settings could be problematic for children also. Children disliked the ways they were treated by some of the staff in these settings and were critical of staff who they perceived as being 'bossy' or 'not nice' and who they felt did not listen to them- 'I don't like much staff in crèche', 'The teachers are very strict', 'The Minders boss you around even when you're not in the crèche' and, 'Sometimes if you get in trouble you have to sit on the couch until your parents come'. Similar to other SAC settings, a small number of children reported that they did not like bullying or peer conflict which

they experienced in the settings. They also disliked having to do their homework because they did not get appropriate help or the setting was too loud for them to concentrate.

5. Discussion

The views offer us an insight into what children value in the places available to them for school age care, the SAC activities they are familiar with and those they prefer. They also alert us to the degree to which children value being consulted about the nature of those activities and how important having a choice is for them (Authors, 2017b).

Children of both age cohorts valued having spaces to relax, to play with their friends and to have some privacy and flexibility in SAC. Children's voting confirms what we know about where children in Ireland go after school and who, primarily, cares for them during this time (CSO, 2017) with the majority of 8-12 year olds choosing home, followed by friends and relatives houses. The Growing Up in Ireland data similarly confirms that most nine year olds in Ireland have regular contact with their extended family in after-school care (GUI, 2009). The consultation findings support research identifying children's positive experiences of being cared for after school at home (Forsberg & Strandell, 2007) and Karsten's (2005) work on children's bedrooms as places that offer an escape from parental control and the adult gaze. Increasing levels of stress in children's lives is documented in the literature (Taylor & Orlick, 2004) and children's identification of homelike spaces and places where they can de-stress is, therefore, important in considering the development of the SAC environment. Interestingly, however, in a recent survey, where Irish parents were asked what type of alternative childcare they would like to use for their primary school children that they are currently not using, crèche/ playgroup/ after-school facility was the most desired alternative childcare type (59%), while a paid relative or family friend was the least desired type of alternative childcare (1%) (CSO, 2017). This raises some important questions about the voice of the child and tensions between parental need for convenience and quality standards (Cartmel & Hayes, 2016) and children's desire for less structured family-like environments in SAC.

Play was a priority for children and they valued choice in play and, in particular, opportunities for outdoor play, reflecting key issues highlighted in the literature relating to the importance of providing opportunities for authentic play. The consultations alert us to the danger of rigid categorisation of play, highlighted in children's views, for instance, on the interaction between

outdoor play, tech play and relational play. Play is reported as the best thing about SAC by a high number of 5-12 year old children involved in an Australian study (Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015). The variety of play forms engaged in by children is evident in these consultations. This is also highlighted in Irish research which found that five year olds in Ireland engaged in make-believe games, enjoyed music, dance or movement, painting or drawing, and played with an electronic device frequently, the majority doing so every day (Smyth, 2016). Similarly, in international research, children emphasise the importance of choice within play and a wide variety of play (Henshall & Lacey, 2007; Kapasi & Gleave, 2009; King & Howard, 2014; Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015).

Despite studies indicating that children are becoming increasingly separated from the natural world as their access to the outdoors diminishes (Dowdall, Gray, & Malone, 2011), the predominance of outdoor play reported in these consultations was striking. This is reflected in international research that outdoor spaces are of significant importance to children (Greenfield, 2004) and Irish research which identifies young children's enjoyment of being outdoors and documents the regular participation of children in unstructured physical play, such as climbing trees/ frames, playing with a ball, chasing, riding a bicycle and roller-skating (GUI, 2013).The prominence of tech play in children's lives emerging from the consultations is also evident in international research indicating that children are growing up in a digital world and are immersed in practices relating to popular culture, media and new technologies from birth (Marsh, Brooks, Hughes, Ritchie, Roberts, & Wright, 2005). For example, Witherspoon & Manning (2012) examining gaming as a form of play state that children between eight and eighteen years old spend more time engaged in technology-based media activities than they do in any other activity but sleeping. While, Downey, Hayes, & O'Neill, (2005) in their study of play and technology for Irish four and twelve year-olds found that they have quite a high degree of access to technology and when alone, children often turn to technology for entertainment and when playing console or computer games, most children like to play against another person.

The importance of being with friends in SAC, as identified by children in the consultations, is supported by research indicating the value afforded by children to peer relations, friendships and play (Dunn, 2004; Jans, 2004 cited in Kernan, 2010). Also, the opportunities provided by formal SAC to engage with their friends is highlighted by children as among the things they like best in SAC spaces and places (Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015; Dockett & Perry, 2016)

Furthermore, we are alerted to the value of giving close consideration to food and opportunities for rest and relaxation when considering SAC opportunities for children. Food was very important to children in their SAC experience reflecting the importance of food practices in adult–child intergenerational relationships and as an expression of children's agency, as found elsewhere (Ralph 2013; Bjerke, 2011). The findings from these consultations are echoed in international research highlighting that food and eating procedures is one of the top things that children would change about formal SAC settings (Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015).

Finally, children discussing structured SAC in the form of crèche and after-school settings mentioned a larger number of issues which they disliked compared to the children discussing other forms of SAC. While they did identify opportunities for indoor and outdoor play and, being with their friends along with help with homework as positive factors about going to crèche or after-school settings. Predominantly, they spoke about problems relating to food; age-appropriate play, toys and activities; relationships with staff; and the physical SAC settings themselves. Similarly, Strandell (2013) highlights the spatial challenges in providing SAC. While, in an Australian literature review of SAC, Cartmel & Hayes (2016) find that insufficient space and play equipment can be a barrier to SAC services providing active choices for children before and after school. Consequently, there is scope for SAC programme staff to be trained to provide creative opportunities for physical activity, both with- and without-access to play equipment and space.

6. Conclusions

These findings raise a number of questions: how to resolve the tensions between parental need for convenience, cost and quality standards and children's desire for less structured family/home-like environments?; how to meet children's need for play, especially outdoor play, in all SAC contexts (whether purpose built or not); and who are the appropriate practitioners to work in the SAC sector and what sort of training do they require? The overwhelming finding about children's preferences for a homelike environment needs to inform policy on SAC in Ireland and elsewhere. It is disappointing then, that while the Action Plan on School Age Childcare (2017, p.7) acknowledges that a home-like environment was preferred by many of the children consulted, nonetheless it is still committed to the 'use of schools and existing community facilities which have suitable environments available for SAC'. A Working Group on the Development of SAC Quality Standards has been

established by government and children's views and preferences as stated in these consultations must shape any regulations and standards that follow.

Policy development that addresses these priorities, in the context of the reality of the different sites of care for children and personnel available, could be viewed as policy development that includes the voices of children. Children as stakeholders have pragmatic ideas about how to enhance the quality of SAC experiences. For policy and services to further improve, it is important to engage with children and heed their insights.

6.1 Study Limitations and Future research

This research consulted with children who experienced a variety of SAC experiences and it was limited by a lack of purposeful sampling with children who specifically experienced SAC. Future research in Ireland and elsewhere could examine the views of these children and further explore some of the issues raised in this study. In addition it may be useful to follow children over a number of years to assess how their experience of SAC changes if they are experiencing it over an extended period of time.

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Highlights

- SAC settings are important contexts of childhood & one of the fastest growing ECEC services.
- Provision of SAC in Ireland is seen as a 'parental responsibility'.
- Children valued spaces to relax, play with friends and some flexibility in SAC.
- Children in structured SAC identified problems with food; age-appropriate play, toys & activities; & staff.
- Children's preferences for a homelike environment needs to inform policy on SAC.